

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 10, 2018

The Honorable James N. Mattis  
Secretary of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Mattis:

We are concerned by your remarks related to women in combat delivered to cadets at the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) on September 25, 2018, which contradict both your testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on January 12, 2017, as well as the hard-fought success of women who have integrated into combat occupations. At your confirmation hearing, you asserted: “I have no plan to oppose women in any aspect of our military.”<sup>1</sup> But your recent comments cast doubt on your support for women in combat occupations, even as the Department of Defense (DOD) has witnessed women graduate from the Army’s Ranger School, serve in Army infantry units, and complete the Marine Corps Infantry Officer Course since your confirmation. We request clarification of your assertions related to women in combat occupations and any DOD data that would run counter to the clear progress since 2015.

As Secretary of Defense, your words send a powerful message to the men and women currently serving in uniform. In response to a question from a VMI cadet regarding whether women in combat occupations makes us more combat effective, you asked: “Is it a strength or a weakness to have women in that circumstance [the close quarters fight]?”<sup>2</sup> This question fuels the perception that women have not yet demonstrated their value and strength on the battlefield, despite the reality that women have served in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan over the last 17 years after successfully surmounting the same rigorous training standards as their male counterparts. Additionally, you underscored that “clearly the jury is out” on whether women can successfully serve in combat occupations and highlighted that you inherited the policy. These comments undermine the historic contributions of women who have served in combat and undercut efforts by previous Department leaders and senior uniformed military leaders who strive toward unit integration.

Your comments articulate an antiquated vision for society that cements entrenched, traditional gender roles that women servicemembers have long rebuked. Despite your assertions, women have assumed combat occupations since the founding of the United States—sometimes

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<sup>1</sup> CQ Congressional Transcripts. “Senate Armed Services Committee Holds Hearing on the Nomination of Gen. James N. Mattis to be Defense Secretary.” January 12, 2017. <http://www.cq.com/doc/congressionaltranscripts-5019713?0>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Defense Transcripts. “Remarks by Secretary Mattis at the Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, Virginia.” Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis; General Binford J.H. Peay, VMI Superintendent. September 25, 2018. <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1645050/remarks-by-secretary-mattis-at-the-virginia-military-institute-lexington-virgin/>.

disguised as men to circumvent the barriers placed on their service—and have fought courageously alongside their male counterparts for centuries. As Secretary, it is your responsibility to exercise fairness toward all servicemembers—regardless of gender—rather than perpetuate these false notions.

As you are aware, military departments and the Special Operations Command conducted research from 2013 to 2015 as part of the “women in the service review” (WISR), which included 41 studies to evaluate unit cohesion, women’s health, and propensity to serve, among other issues related to integration.<sup>3</sup> Based on these findings, final recommendations from the Secretaries of the Military Departments prompted the December 2015 policy change that opened all combat arms military occupational specialties to women who met validated occupational standards, without exception.

Since 2015, the military services have overseen deliberate implementation of combat integration with great success. According to a *Military Times* report,<sup>4</sup> almost 800 women currently serve in Army infantry, armor, and fire support roles, with 51 female infantry officers and 253 women in the infantry enlisted ranks. An additional 51 women currently serve in the officer and enlisted ranks in the Army Reserve, while 18 women have successfully completed Army Ranger training. There are only 26 female enlisted Marines in the infantry and one female officer as of late August, although the number of women in Marine combat units has increased from 254 to 382 just this year. Women face existing barriers within the military, including the “Leaders First” directive for the U.S. Army and the Marine Corps’ continued male-only basic training for West Coast recruits. We will continue to monitor pending litigation, *Service Women’s Action Network v. James N. Mattis*, which challenges these barriers.

Women who meet every requirement of service in the infantry—including lethality in hand-to-hand combat—should not be discouraged from military service, and we encourage you to publicly challenge the perception that allowing women to serve in combat occupations will reduce the effectiveness of our armed forces. DOD is responsible for recruiting and retaining women servicemembers in areas disproportionately dominated by men. We welcome your policy recommendations to better prepare more women to pursue these jobs, ensure successful gender integration within units in combat occupations across the services, promote and maintain gender-neutral standards, and encourage career advancement for women servicemembers by appropriately recognizing their contributions.

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<sup>3</sup> Kristy N. Kamarck. “Women in Combat: Issues for Congress.” Congressional Research Service. December 13, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Lolita C. Baldor. “Mattis: Jury is out on women succeeding in combat jobs.” *Military Times*, September 25, 2018. <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2018/09/25/mattis-jury-is-out-on-women-succeeding-in-combat-jobs/>.

We urge you to continue implementation of the 2015 policy that opened all combat arms military occupational specialties in all services to women and we look forward to working with you on this important issue.

Sincerely,

Kirsten Gillibrand  
United States Senator

Richard Blumenthal  
United States Senator

Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator

Kamala D. Harris  
United States Senator



Sherrod Brown  
United States Senator



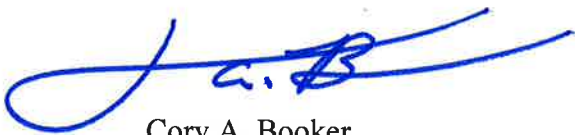
Richard J. Durbin  
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders  
United States Senator



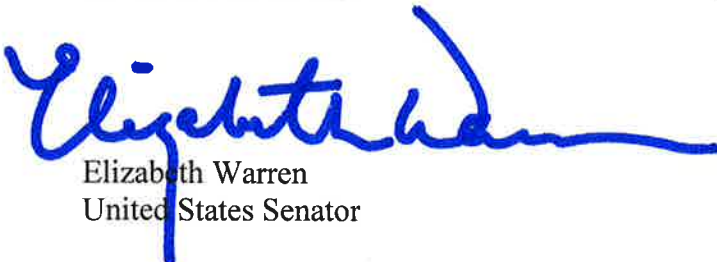
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